

## In tourism, a rising tide floats all boats

*Success of Vancouver USA's new waterfront project has attracted people to Vancouver as a destination*

Nov 16, 2018



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The success of Vancouver USA's new waterfront is no surprise. After months of anticipation, years of preparation and a grand opening celebration attended by thousands, the \$1.5 billion waterfront hums with activity and palpable excitement.

Both Twigs Bistro and WildFin American Grill draw hungry crowds from sun up to sun down while their kitchens churn out a seemingly unending parade of delectable dishes and drinks. Nearby, Grant Street Pier and the Vancouver Waterfront Park have quickly become an iconic destination backdrop – an “Instagramable” must for anyone visiting Vancouver.

None of this is surprising. After all, the project was boldly envisioned by Columbia Waterfront, LLC, and the City of Vancouver, thoughtfully shepherded by Gramor

Development, and promoted by a variety of vested partners, included a six-month marketing campaign from us at Visit Vancouver USA.

What might come as a surprise, though, is the success this project has had not just for the individual businesses and attractions at the waterfront, but for the destination as a whole.

Walk or drive through downtown Vancouver on almost any given night of the week and you will find hungry customers in line for street tacos, groups of climbers scaling the walls at the Source, 20-somethings hopping from one brewery to the next and evening events at the Kiggins Theatre. Head up Main Street to Uptown Village and the story is the same. Go east to The Mill or Columbia Tech Center and find a similar situation.

The latest additions at the waterfront have not detracted from existing businesses or attractions, but have instead generated new awareness and interest in Vancouver's offerings with both residents and visitors.

Take for example the area's rapidly growing food and drink scene. Just a month after the opening of the new restaurants at the waterfront, Visit Vancouver USA wrapped our largest and most successful dining month to date, with 30 local restaurants participating and thousands of dining denizens. Similarly, just as Maryhill Winery prepares to make its debut at the waterfront this winter, the Southwest Washington Winery Association is prepping to make its case for American Viticultural Area (AVA) status.

Coupled with a strong economy, the heightened awareness of Vancouver generated by the waterfront opening has helped growth beget more growth.

On the travel and tourism side, we continue to hear from meeting planners, leisure-seeking visitors and business travelers who are excited by the new waterfront and Vancouver's emergence as a destination with a strong regional draw. Initial projections show the waterfront will attract 200,000 out-of-area visitors annually, with expectations that number will continue to rise as new hotels open their doors. The waterfront's Hotel Indigo is under construction, and the AC Marriot at neighboring Terminal 1 is expected to follow suit shortly.

Of course, there are always growing pains that face a rapidly changing destination. More than 1,000 new hotel rooms are proposed in Vancouver over the next three years, including those currently under construction at the waterfront as well as hotels east of I-205, like the soon-to-open 132-room Best Western Premiere. New supply can help generate demand, but the best of drivers of demand are robust marketing, positive PR to create word-of-mouth buzz and group solicitation efforts.

Our office is tasked with much of this promotion, but it's a community-wide effort. The happy hour items at a downtown bistro are just as important as the cocktails at a waterfront restaurant, a tour on the historic reserve or a shop in east Vancouver. Each asset makes up a piece of the destination story and allows us to show visitors the vibrancy of Vancouver.

We still have work to do to prepare for this increase in hotel supply, but if the new waterfront shows us anything, it's that a rising tide of tourism floats all boats.

*Kim Bennett has served since 1999 as the president & CEO of Visit Vancouver USA, the primary destination marketing organization for Vancouver and Clark County. She is the immediate past president of DMA West (Destination Marketing Associations of the West) and serves by gubernatorial appointment on the Washington Film Commission, representing destination marketing organizations throughout the state.*